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Apocalypse, Iconoclasm And Islamic State – Analysis

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Islamic State's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

From destroying monuments, killing populace, peddling selective historical narratives and establishing the first and maybe the last Caliphate of the 21st century to disseminating apocalyptic prophecies, ISIS has been very busy with a lot of projects. It detests being called Daesh and proudly parades its penchant for sensationalistic and horrific violence. It survives and thrives on theatrics that are eminently possible in a modern age no matter how much it seeks to rail against it. These theatricalities range from the burning of a Jordanian pilot to proclamations of an apocalyptic standoff with everyone that do not fit into its worldview which is not very inclusive to say the least.

Beneath this veneer of hyperactivity, ISIS is an analyst's nightmare. Information about it is sketchy, and any credible details about its inner workings are hard to come by. Apart from its widely publicized 'achievements', the present purported Caliph of the Islamic State took up the mantle, ironically, by proclaiming himself as the descendant of the tenth Imam, from the Shia tradition, while taking on the other hand an irremediably anti-Shia posture.

In spite of embracing apocalyptic tone, it has been diligently attentive to the needs of a modern state. To state a few, it collects taxes, assigns members for tedious paperwork, and seeks to monopolize violence in its territories. Thus, it is hard to pin it down because it is a concatenation of all that we perceive as contradictory. One of the unlikeliest sources of analytical help here seems to be the French word 'bricolage'. Meaning 'to work with whatever one can find' it provides a picture of ISIS wherein it tries to work its way around with whatever raw material it finds in any and every possible way.

Through this lens, I will look at ISIS's usage of apocalyptic narratives, its attempt at manufacturing memory and its iconoclasm or the destruction of monuments.

Marketing the apocalypse

From being a low impact affiliate of Al Qaeda in Iraq to transforming itself into a transnational religious movement/State/Caliphate, ISIS's career trajectory has so far been a success. It regularly recruits and lures potential candidates by proffering, among others, the possibility of participating in a once in an earth's lifetime event- an apocalypse.

Apocalypse and apocalyptic propaganda are its centerpieces and, in fact, have motivated to a large extent one of the Islamic state's initial founder Abu Ayyub al-Masri during its first stint. It is more than evident in the present leaders and members' worldviews. A testament to this was when its fighters captured the strategically low-value town of Dabiq. According to Islamic eschatology, Dabiq is the chosen place for end times. That Dabiq is mentioned in the hadith indeed works for the Islamic State.

The land referred to as al-sham by ISIS, figures prominently in the prophecies and can be roughly equated with Eastern Mediterranean region. Places such as Dabiq are important for various reasons. Firstly, it is a tangible manifestation and not merely a figment of the imagination. Secondly, it offers or act as a conduit between the temporal and the other world thereby acquiring a significance for many, a testament to the possibility and reality of contact with the divine.

Controlling and reigning over such space is important, for it can be instrumental in rallying and attracting recruits. This was evident in the way Dabiq was fought for, even losing many members in the process. It is not merely of symbolic value but of material as well. ISIS, in another instance of throwing away all that does not fit into its paradigm and taking only that is useful for it, conveniently throws the blanket on another prophecy which states that the antichrist will rise from al-sham, where it currently reigns.

The possibility of having a visceral experience at these places is too much to forego for many. Along with the possibility of reliving history through the material remains, these places also proffer the palatable prospect of spiritual merit. In fact, the magazine brought out by ISIS is titled 'Dabiq' and in the very first page of the first issue, the writers enumerate on its importance and place in history. There is a marketing ploy here. It is a message to the potential recruits that by quoting Dabiq and insinuating that it is under the group's control, the group seeks to advertise the idea that it now controls and has access to premium apocalyptic real estate – and thus draws potential recruits from such a scenario. It is premised on the assumption that the contagious charisma of the place, material as well as ideational transfers to the state. It is promotion through association. Whether it believes the apocalyptic garb or not, it certainly helps ISIS in pursuance of various endeavors.

During its initial stint from 2006 under Abu Ayyub al-Masri, Islamic State swerved toward messianism in spite of being warned about such thinking being fraught with danger by Al Qaeda leadership. ISIS in its revamped self however, has managed to render and fire apocalyptic missives frequently while not taking lightly the quotidian concerns that arise out of running a state/caliphal enterprise.

Compounding this, is its agenda to eclipse history by peddling a skewed version of it. Its version of history seeks to throw under the carpet the connections and exchanges of the past. It throws up monolithic actors having no interactions with each other over the course of millennia. A paradox lies at the heart of such an understanding or recourse to history. While it enthusiastically calls up this monolithic version to serve its projects, it also rails with extreme gusto against the West and its attendant ancillaries such as colonialism, imperialism and capitalism for all the iniquities visited upon Middle East since the Crusades.

While the previous affiliates also sought refuge in history and tried to deploy skewed historical narratives they showed a considerable amount of disdain for apocalyptic or eschatological projects. For the Al Qaeda leaders and coterie, apocalypse or notions about eschatology were not particularly fetching. ISIS deviates from others here in the alacrity with which it has embraced such projects. The upsurge of interest and belief in apocalyptic tone has got to do with the instability and civil wars the region has been roiled by. Massive changes at various levels coupled with unrest and disaffected nature of war in places mentioned as part of apocalyptic prophecies contrived to produce a material cum ideational cash cow in the form of a penchant for apocalypticism that ISIS has meticulously milked in its favor. Furthermore, having been left alone by the governments in Syria and Iraq in the two years after the departure of U.S forces certainly helped it in cementing its fledgling gains.

Iconoclasm and self-legitimization through history

There is a certain amount of envy as well as awe when it comes to structures that outlive the fragility or the vagaries of the human lifespan. They remind us of our mortal selves yet induce a paroxysm of anger and anxiety whenever they are destroyed or vandalized. It is in their property of being timeless as well as vulnerable that we come to cherish them. The intricateness with which violence and cultural destruction are entwined is evident through history wherein any representations of the past are deleted or annihilated by many incoming regimes. On the other

hand, the fact that the monuments and sites destroyed by ISIS stood until 21st century is revelatory for it shows that they were untouched until now by many other regimes in the past.

Iconoclasm which refers to the destruction of images and things ‘other’ is visible across history. The damage wrought by ISIS in the last couple of years across Syria and Iraq is unquestionably irreparable and heinous. Does it imply a lack of history or historical sense as many have suggested? On the contrary, it suggests a surfeit of it. Destruction of this sort was a prerequisite for many in history, if not all, in realizing idioms of social and political power. It ranges from the Abbasid desecration of the graves of Umayyad Caliphs in 750 to Mongol decimation of all that Abbasids held dear in 1258.

These acts of extreme vandalism have been dubbed by some observers as exercises ‘out of spite’ and barbarity. But a closer diagnosis reveals that these destructive impulses are highly unoriginal yet grounded and deeply informed by a sense of history. In fact, the relationship between heritage and anti-heritage is not as antagonistic as it is touted to be. The proximity between the two is eerily close.

In the ISIS checklist of annihilation, many have found a place from Palmyra, the Temple of Bel to graves and shrines of Muslim saints. For ISIS, these monuments deserve ‘disgust and hatred’. Locals are miffed at the destruction of these sites for there is a rich fusion of local beliefs with the larger rubric of Islam. ISIS claims that it alone follows ‘real’ Islam and yet as mentioned its Caliph’s chief source of legitimacy comes from Shi’ism whose followers it considers apostates.

These destructive impulses emerge out of an understanding that history and monuments as such are significant and are tangible repositories of collective memory. Decimation then is an attempt to remove the imprimatur of the previous era or occupants. It is by the destruction that these actors seek to construct a new landscape of memory and by extension history. Here heritage decimation is not an incidental objective but the very object of destruction. Since these sites and monuments are repositories of social as well as the historical memory, they need erasure to make way for the incoming regime. It is also an important exercise in instilling norms of remembrance: It decides what and who is to be forgotten and remembered and more importantly how ISIS is perceived and remembered. It is not quite unusual a project if one looks at how many other states across the world indulge in self-glorification through commemorations or seek sanitized memories by expunging some or fabricating new ones. Material culture thus is potent in many ways. In fact, the foremost symbols emblematic of a fall or rise of regimes beamed across the world by media are that of material artifacts – the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue or the Berlin wall.

Conclusion

From claiming genealogical legitimacy from a tradition whose believers (Shias) ISIS equates with servants of the antichrist and seeks to erase them to brandishing claims of apocalyptic fervor while trading in oil and artifacts, ISIS has been thriving on performances, contradictions, and ambiguities. These orchestrated performances along with the use of ambiguity are intended to give a semblance of credence to the idea that it is ideationally as well as materially not so weak. While the demise of its apocalyptic project and Caliphate are nearby, whether they

crumble on their own or from interventions from outside will be crucial not only for history but for how this attempt at building a Caliphate, from all that is available, will be remembered.